Nova Scotia
Advisory Council
on the Status of
Women

Conseil consultatif
sur la condition
féminine en
Nouvelle-Écosse

An agency of the
Province of Nova Scotia

SUBMISSION
TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE
IN RESPECT OF RESOLUTION NO. 2088
AS AMENDED ON EDUCATION

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The Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women strives to promote equality of opportunity for all women in this province, including young women. We welcome the opportunity to appear before the Select Committee. Our presentation will focus primarily on those parts of the committee's mandate that relate to areas in which we have previously conducted research and made recommendations.

Guidance Counsellors and Guidance Programs

In December 1990, the Advisory Council released a report based on detailed questionnaires administered to over 1,600 young women in grades 10 and 12 throughout Nova Scotia.[1] Drawing on the results of the research, several recommendations were made, many of which focused directly on young women's educational needs. To date, the Council has received no formal response from the Department of Education.

Many of the students surveyed in the study expressed dissatisfaction with the guidance programs in their schools. Almost three-quarters of the young women had been to see a school guidance counsellor, and while the majority said it had been helpful, others expressed strongly negative feelings about the counsellor or the counselling process.

Some students felt belittled, betrayed, and discriminated against; others simply felt they had wasted their time. Several students argued that counselling should provide a forum for the student to make her own choices, rather than to be dictated to by the counsellor. School counselling programs had left many senior high students feeling ill-prepared to make the educational and career choices that would be required of them in the near future. And, finally, some students criticized their guidance counsellors for breaking confidentiality to both parents and teachers, despite the Department of Education code of ethics and confidentiality intended to guide counsellors.

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[1] See Young Women in Nova Scotia: A Study of Attitudes, Behaviour and Aspirations (Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1990) for more details.

School guidance counsellors must not only be qualified to be counsellors, but should also be sensitive to the particular needs of young women. The Advisory Council calls for an in-depth review of the guidance program in Nova Scotia schools; to see where it is and is not meeting the needs of students and how it can be improved. In particular, sexist, racist, and classist biases on the part of the counsellors, and in the programs offered, should be examined and eradicated. This investigation should concentrate primarily on the voices and opinions of the students, who create the need for the service.

The priority that individual principals or school boards place on guidance services makes a significant difference to the effectiveness of a counselling program in any given school. The Advisory Council recommends that the Department of Education develop province-wide policies that all boards and principals will be required to follow in the establishment of a comprehensive guidance program for students.

Drop Out Rates

Over 2,000 girls dropped out of school in Nova Scotia during the 1990-91 school year; 1,784 of them were between the ages of 15 and 19.[2] Students - male and female - drop out of school for a number of individual, familial, social and economic reasons. One of the reasons young women drop out of school is accidental pregnancy.[3] The pregnancy rate among 15-19 year olds in Nova Scotia has been climbing steadily since 1987. And more young women are keeping their babies. The rate of live births to women aged 15-19 years was higher in 1990 than it has been in the last 10 years.[4]

Young women who become mothers in their teens, and leave school, are unlikely to ever finish their education. Returning to school is made difficult by a number of factors, including financial restraints, lack of accessible child care, and competing role obligations. Without completing high school, these young women have little chance of

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[2] Correspondence, Nova Scotia Department of Education, Research Division.

[3] See "Dropout Rate, Pregnancy, Jail Linked," Halifax Chronicle-Herald, February 7, 1992.

[4] Planned Parenthood of Nova Scotia, based on Department of Health statistics.

finding employment that will raise them and their children above the poverty line.[5] Studies in Nova Scotia and elsewhere have shown clearly that even though the majority of teenage mothers wish to continue their education, the majority do not do so, due to lack of social and economic supports.[6]

Clearly, then, it is highly desirable to prevent unintended teen pregnancies. The rising teen pregnancy rate, the long-term educational and employment consequences of teenage parenthood, and rising levels of sexually transmitted diseases make paramount the need for educational programs that assist young women and men in making adequately informed decisions about sexual activity.

Evidence shows that greater numbers of teenagers are engaging in sexual activity at younger and younger ages. Over half of the students in Nova Scotia high schools have had sexual intercourse, and about half of those do so on a regular basis.[7] Fewer than 20 percent of sexually active college students report using condoms; the percentage is undoubtedly lower for high school students.[8]

The Personal Development and Relationships (PDR) course for grades 7, 8, and 9 currently provides some information on conception and teenage pregnancy. At the high school level, a Child Studies course provides grade 11 students with some information concerning human reproduction, family planning and pregnancy. However, this course is offered as an elective. Plans are underway for a compulsory half-credit

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[5] Mothers and Children: One Decade Later (Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, 1991, p. 76.) Furthermore, a strong correlation has been demonstrated between the levels of schooling children attain and the formal levels of education of their mothers. (Communication, Betty-Ann Lloyd, Canadian Congress of Learning Opportunities for Women.)

[6] Ibid.

[7] Canada Youth and AIDS Study, Nova Scotia Report, 1989. Fifty-seven percent of grade 11 students in Nova Scotia had engaged in sexual intercourse, and 32% of grade 9 students had engaged sexual intercourse at least once. In the Advisory Council's study of young women, over half of the students surveyed – 31% of 14 and 15-year-olds, 59% of 16 and 17-year-olds, and 71% of those 18 and over – had already engaged in sexual activity.

[8] Forty-five percent of grade 11 students in Nova Scotia reported they would be embarrassed to buy condoms. Canada Youth and AIDS Study, Nova Scotia Report, p. 21.

course, Careers and Life Management, that will touch on some of the issues in the PDR program.[9]

However, despite the fact that the vast majority of young women students have had sex education in school, many of them express concerns about the quality and depth of these classes.[10] The exact nature of the information, and the amount of time spent covering any particular topic, is to some extent dependent on the individual PDR teacher. The Advisory Council recommends that teachers who are delivering the PDR program in the classroom be required to demonstrate a sensitivity to the issues involved, and an openness to debate and discussion of differing points of view. In addition, mandatory workshops, seminars, or training sessions must prepare teachers to deal with the subject in a more comprehensive manner.

The Advisory Council also recommends that young women (and men) be supplied with information about sexual feelings, working out problems in sexual relationships, and assessing the sexual history of a potential sex partner, in the context of the PDR program, and any appropriate high school course implemented in future.[11] None of this material is normally covered in the current curriculum. This information, as well as accessible, reliable birth control must be made available to students in every part of Nova Scotia, if we hope to reduce the rate of unintended teen pregnancies[12], and subsequently the drop out rates of young women students.

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[9] Communication, L. Delbridge, Guidance Consultant, Department of Education.

[10] Young Women in Nova Scotia: A Study of Attitudes, Behaviour and Aspirations (Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1990). For example, there was no significant difference in the numbers of young women wanting information about AIDS and other STDs, regardless of whether or not they had taken sex education classes. Clearly, at least some of these students' needs are not being met through existing curricula.

[11] See Report on the Status of Sexuality Education and Family Planning (Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1990) for a more complete discussion of the Advisory Council's views and recommendations pertaining to sex education in Nova Scotia schools.

[12] Maureen Jessop Orton and Ellen Rosenblat, Adolescent Pregnancy in Ontario: Progress in Prevention, Report No. 2. Toronto: Planned Parenthood Ontario, February 1986.

In summary, comprehensive, accurate, non-judgmental education about sex and sexuality is one necessary step toward reducing the rate of unintended teen pregnancy. When young women do become pregnant, and decide to keep their babies, many pressures – including the lack of accessible child care[13] – make it difficult for them to continue school. Once they have dropped out, these young mothers face long-lasting educational, employment, economic and social repercussions.

Anti-racist/Multicultural Education[14]

Many Nova Scotians have a history of oppression as a result of their skin colour, particularly indigenous Blacks and aboriginal peoples. In the school system, these students have experienced a quality of education which has been significantly different from – and poorer than – that of their white peers. Non-white female students face the double discrimination of sexism, resulting in a severe constraining of educational options. Much work remains to be done to improve anti-racist and multicultural education.

Nova Scotia's educational system should support and value different cultural traditions, and foster a better understanding of the particular difficulties faced by historically disadvantaged students.

Teachers and counsellors from historically oppressed groups can provide an understanding of racism that is a valuable teaching tool for minority and white students alike. They are also important role models for young people. The Advisory Council recommends the adoption of affirmative action hiring policies.

In addition, school board materials (including intelligence or achievement tests) should be examined for bias and those that are found to be ethnocentric, or racist, should be eliminated or used only in such a way as to teach students about racism and oppression. At the same time, materials which actively promote racial awareness and

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[13] Very few schools in the province have child care provisions for students. Communication, L. Delbridge, Guidance Consultant, Department of Education.

[14] See Submission to the Halifax County-Bedford District School Board Race Relations Committee (Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1990) for more details.

acceptance must be sought out. Since intolerance has been learned, tolerance must be taught.

In the same vein, an educational model based on specifically Christian morality is no longer appropriate in our culturally diverse society. Any provisions relating to Christian morality should be amended to refer only to morality.

Incidents of racial harassment and violence in Nova Scotia schools have raised public awareness of the existence of racism in our education system. Too often these incidents are handled in ways which inflame racist sentiments rather than promote tolerance and understanding. This violence must be treated with the seriousness it warrants.

Furthermore, the level of violence in general is rising in schools.[15] For the victims, not only is this personally threatening, but it also creates a negative learning environment – it's hard to learn when you're terrified. The Advisory Council recommends that the Department of Education develop standardized policies to address incidents of violence – whatever their motivation – in Nova Scotia schools. In addition, the PDR curriculum should be expanded to include a component on violence, dating abuse, and non-violent conflict resolution.

Some school boards and individual schools have established anti-racist and multicultural education policies. However, these policies are not pursued uniformly in all schools or all school board districts. The Advisory Council believes that all school boards in the province should develop race relations and multicultural education policies, and that principles of anti-racist education should not only be included in curriculum guidelines, but also mandated by legislation.

The variation in the development and implementation of anti-racist policies is just one example of an over-riding problem of lack of uniformity in the schools in this province. It results in major discrepancies in quality of education across the province, from one school to another, or from one school board district to another. The Advisory Council submits that increasing the powers of the Minister of Education and the Governor in Council with respect to school boards would serve to increase the uniformity of

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[15] For example, see "Heterosexual Harassment," Dalhousie Gazette, February 13, 1992.

educational practices across school board districts, thus reducing the variance in quality of education throughout the province.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women recommends:

1) that the Department of Education conduct an in-depth review of the guidance program in Nova Scotia schools to see where it is and is not meeting the needs of students and how it can be improved. In particular, sexist, racist, and classist biases on the part of the counsellors, and in the programs offered, should be examined and eradicated;

2) that the Department of Education develop province-wide policies that all boards and principals will be required to follow in the establishment of a comprehensive guidance program for students;

3) that teachers who are delivering the PDR program in the classroom be required to demonstrate a sensitivity to the issues involved, and an openness to debate and discussion of differing points of view. In addition, mandatory workshops, seminars, or training sessions must prepare teachers to deal with the subject in a more comprehensive manner;

4) that the Department of Education recognize teen pregnancy as a significant reason young women drop out of school, and recognize the importance of sex education in the prevention of unintended pregnancy;

5) that the Department of Education recognize that leadership on this issue is vital, and work toward the education of teachers, principals, school administrators, and board members in recognition of the high rates of sexual activity among teenagers in Nova Scotia, and the acceptance of extended family planning and sexuality education programs to combat the unintended results of this sexual activity;

6) that the Province of Nova Scotia increase funding to expand sex education programs in this province in an effort to reduce the number of unintended

pregnancies, and subsequently the school drop out rates among young women students;

7) that a serious effort be made, through affirmative action policies, to recruit greater numbers of teachers and school guidance counsellors from historically oppressed groups, particularly women who often face double discrimination in the hiring process, and that the Dalhousie University Law School affirmative action policy be used as a guiding measure;

8) that policy makers, administrators, and teachers receive sufficient education to more easily recognize the ethnocentric focus of much of the written and visual school materials;

9) that school board materials be examined for bias, particularly texts which portray non-whites in a very limited way based on stereotypes now recognized as racist. Such materials should be eliminated from the classrooms or used only in ways which promote an understanding of racism and oppression. Texts and audio-visual materials must be sought that actively counteract racism and promote racial awareness and acceptance;

10) that tests used to measure intelligence, achievement, and psychological or emotional well-being be assessed for inherent qualities of racism and/or sexism and that tests found to be so flawed be discarded;

11) that any provisions relating to Christian morality should be amended to refer only to morality;

12) that school boards formulate race relations and multicultural education policies. Such policies should (a) convey clearly to perpetrators and the public that racial harassment and violence will not be tolerated, and (b) support and value different cultural traditions and foster an understanding of the particular difficulties faced by historically disadvantaged students; and

13) that anti-racist education principles be not only included in curriculum guidelines, but also mandated by legislation.